

Sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan: An Analytical Study

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ABSTRACT: *Gilgit-Baltistan, a Northern Pakistani region, is the study's focus. This paper investigates the historical, social, and political factors contributing to sectarian violence in the area, including the role of ethnic and religious identities, geopolitical dynamics, and state policies. The research draws on various sources, including media reports, academic studies, and videos. The paper argues that sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan is a multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon that requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and dynamics. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for policymakers and community leaders to address the root causes of sectarianism and promote peaceful coexistence in the region.*

Keywords: Gilgit-Baltistan, Sectarianism, Religious Identities, Sectarian Violence

In essence, religion can bring about harmony, peace, and a sense of brotherhood. At the same time, it can also bring challenges to its followers. When individuals interpret religion based on their perceptions and impose their beliefs on others, it can result in religious intolerance. (Shah). Sectarianism refers to conflicts, splits, and breaks within a religious community that is believed to be uniform. These differences often lead to religious violence between sects due to belief discrepancies. In Pakistan, the last forty years have witnessed Shia-Sunni sectarian violence that has disrupted peace in numerous ways, both violent and non-violent.

Intolerance can give rise to sectarian clashes, which involve disputes based on religious, political, philosophical, or other differences. Examples include the ongoing conflict between Shia and Sunni Muslims and the historical conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster and Western Scotland. These clashes can be particularly intense and divisive, with individuals and groups strongly identifying with their respective beliefs and ideologies. It is important to recognize the dangers of sectarianism and promote mutual understanding and respect among different groups to prevent such conflicts from escalating. It is important to note that sectarian violence is not limited to Muslim societies but is present in all major world religions, with a history predating Islam's emergence.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of sectarianism can be categorized into two theoretical perspectives. On one end are the doctrinal and constitutional interpretations, which argue that sectarianism arises from established systems of beliefs and sect members are obligated to adhere to them. While these interpretations do not completely dismiss sociocultural influences, they prioritize dominance.

of doctrinal and constitutional positions. Studies that support the doctrinal aspect of sectarianism do not assign significant importance to authorized religio-sectarian contents. On the other hand, socio-political and socio-

cultural interpretations of sectarianism predominantly view it from a practical perspective, solely based on human practices. To put it simply, one interpretation rejects the socio-cultural aspect of reality, while the other marginalizes the possibility of ideological differences playing a role.

Reckwitz's theory of social practice incorporates both ideas and actions in its epistemological approach to understanding social reality. It divides agency among the mind, body, objects, and physical world to form a cohesive whole. However, the dominance in this approach lies with the material aspect of the practice (Reckwitz).

Even though the concept of the significance of practice appears to be more important, and the construction of the mind is also seen as a social aspect, it still enables this formation or arrangement to continue as a foundational representation for an extended period. This implies that it has an impact on physicality and takes over consequently (J).

Alexander introduced a cultural pragmatics theory that goes beyond the traditional separation of meaning structures, contingency, power, and materiality and combines them in a new way. I suggest that instead of focusing solely on the material aspect of practices, a more comprehensive concept of performances should be used (Alexander)

Retrospect on Sectarianism in Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit-Baltistan is known for its rich ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. It is home to various communities with distinct identities, beliefs, and practices. Among the major religious groups, 39% of the population in this region identifies as Shia, while 27% follow the Sunni branch of Islam. Less than 1% of the population are members of non-Muslim communities, with Ismailis making up 18% and Nurbakhshis making up 16%. (Hunzai). Over the past 30 years, sectarian violence has plagued Gilgit-Baltistan, resulting in the loss of many lives. During General Zia ul Haq's rule, the policy of Islamization affected Gilgit Baltistan and led to waves of unrest in the region.

Bifurcation based on sect not only poses a threat to peace and security but also negatively impacts the social, economic, and political aspects of the entire region. The consequences of sectarian violence extend beyond the affected area and impact people living far away from their homes and families. Recently, there have been numerous cases of massacres in Gilgit-Baltistan, which have sparked large demonstrations against the government and security agencies. The security agencies responded by imposing a curfew on the area for more than three weeks, which had serious negative effects on several sectors, most notably education and health. (Varley).

The populace of Gilgit-Baltistan suffered from the chronic issue of religious intolerance, which continues to pose challenges even today. Most of the population lives in rural areas, where resource management is primarily reliant on strong family relationships, cooperation, and mutual support. Tribal bonds are more important in such groups than religious affiliations. Islam was introduced to the region by Sufi saints who believed in universal human values as the foundation of a prosperous life (Feyyaz). Diverse communities in Gilgit-Baltistan have co-existed peacefully for a long time, with ethnic and tribal ties serving as the basis for cooperation, rather than religion being the primary unifying force. Historically, the families in charge of governing this area tended to implement laws and policies that were separate from religious influence. They focused on managing administrative functions, addressing issues related to the public, and handling other socio-political affairs (Syed).

For a long time, Afghanistan has struggled with sectarian violence because of its historical challenges during the Afghan War and the subsequent development of the Taliban. These events have exacerbated existing rivalries, resulting in national destabilization. Allama Arif Hussain al-Hussaini, a member of the Turi Pashtun

community in Parachinar, played an important role in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. He was sent to Pakistan to organize and unite the Shia community. Following Mufti Jafar's death in 1983, Allama Arif Hussain al-Hussaini took over as leader of the Tehreek e Nifaz e Fiqh Jafaria (TNFJ). It is important to mention that the TNFJ began in Bhakkar in 1979 when Shia leaders expressed concerns over Zia's Sunni Islamization strategy. This program sought to impose a particular interpretation of Shariah that contradicted the norms of Fiqh-e-Jafaria, the Shia Islamic jurisprudence. As a result, they founded the TNFJ to proclaim their distinct identity, protect their rights, and oppose any attempts by the Sunni majority and the government to force their religious views on them.

The present-day organized sectarian conflict in Pakistan can be traced back to the assassination of TNFJ leader Arif Hussain al Hussaini in 1988. According to Muhammad Feyyaz, the TNFJ continues to play an influential role in promoting the interests of the Shia community in Pakistan. The movement's efforts have been met with opposition and violence from various sectarian groups, exacerbating community tensions. The situation remains volatile, with continued efforts needed to promote tolerance, understanding, and peaceful coexistence between different religious groups in Pakistan (Feyyaz). Pakistan faced a spike in sectarian violence in February 1990, which was linked to the killing of Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi, founder of the Sipah Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), a group promoting Sunni supremacy and targeting the Shia community. The SSP's extremist ideology and violent actions have been denounced by the government and religious leaders, emphasizing the need for tolerance and peacefully countering extremism. This incident led to several fatalities and intense clashes. The impact of this sectarian violence extended to Gilgit-Baltistan, disturbing its peace.

In the past, Sectarian conflicts in Gilgit-Baltistan were primarily centered around religious gatherings where speeches by religious

leaders sometimes fueled tensions between Shia and Sunni communities (Ahmad). However, the elders intervened promptly and resolved the situation. The year 1975 saw a significant outbreak of violence resulting from sectarian conflict that caused the loss of many lives. The incident occurred during the month of Muharram when a Shia procession was attacked by gunfire from a Sunni Mosque. The arrest of the Sunni Qazi, the religious leader, further aggravated the situation, leading to riots spreading to the Indus Valley regions of Gilgit and Diamer. Sunni Muslims of the region threatened to attack Gilgit City if the *Qazi* was not freed. In 1983, another dispute arose between the two sects regarding the sighting of the Shawal moon and the declaration of Eid (Muslim Festival), which marked the end of Ramadan (Bansal).

On Eid ul-Fitr, the head of the Shia community declared that Eid would be observed the following day, despite the Sunni community still observing their fast. This created a sensitive situation, as it is against Muslim beliefs to fast on the day of Eid. This disagreement led to a sectarian conflict that resulted in violent clashes in Gilgit, leading to the deaths of two individuals and numerous injuries. These types of escalations of sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan can be attributed to various internal and external factors, including economic inequality, social stratification, high levels of unemployment, and a dearth of cultural, traditional, and recreational activities like music and dance (Bansal).

In that tense situation, a significant proportion of the rural populace has relocated to urban areas seeking improved prospects, leading to a substantial shift in demographics in Gilgit and other central hubs. To address this, the federal government has implemented various policies, but these have not been beneficial for the populace. Instead of a neutral approach, the national leadership has supported a Sunni Islamization strategy based on Wahabi radical ideology. Furthermore, the discontent

with this Islamization has not been fully addressed, resulting in another issue that has affected the local population (Wolf).

In Gilgit-Baltistan, there were deliberate attempts to alter the demographic makeup through the controlled and protected migration of people to Gilgit. This resulted in a significant influx of migrants that marginalized the local communities and caused resentment among them. The population growth and limited employment opportunities created sharp economic disparities, which contributed to a rise in violent acts and crime. Persistent issues in Gilgit-Baltistan include sectarian conflicts that have endured for a long time, along with external factors such as the funding and training of Mujahideen to fight against the Soviet Union, the spillover effects of the Afghan war, and the lasting impact of Zia's policies promoting Islamization (Wolf).

During the final stages of General Zia ul Haq's military rule in 1988, a group armed Lashkar (group), estimated to be around eighty thousand, entered Gilgit and killed over four hundred individuals from the Shia community. Some reports suggest the number of attackers is uncertain. The Lashkar destroyed the village of Jalalabad by setting fire to the homes of the Shia community. The actual reason and intention behind the attack remain unknown, but some speculate that it may have been in response to news of the Shia's killing of the Sunni community in the Gilgit region.

Similarly, some individuals believe that the rumor was intentionally spread to provoke an attack by Sunni militants and give them a suitable platform for their violent acts. The violent killing of around four hundred Shia individuals signaled the start of a new and intensified period of sectarian conflict in Gilgit-Baltistan. This incident was even more vicious, unpredictable, and severe than previous sectarian conflicts. It is known that such conflicts are sometimes supported by external groups like Saudi Arabia and Iran, which provide funding, weapons, and intelligence assistance (Siddiq).

Following the incident, the Shia community became more proactive in protecting themselves from violence and preventing it from happening in the future. They acknowledged their vulnerability and decided to increase

their preparedness in case of a prolonged conflict with Sunni militant groups (Rizvi). The Shia community believed that the state was secretly supporting the Sunni militant groups, which explained why their attacks went unchecked. Consequently, they sought financial aid and strategic guidance from Iran. Both the Shia and Sunni groups began recruiting young people to join their militant organizations in preparation for potential conflicts and disputes. The accumulation of illegal light and heavy weapons escalated the ongoing armed race and gave both sides the confidence to carry out violence and attacks more openly and easily (Reflections).

In 2011, there were forty reported cases, and in 2012, nearly one hundred people were killed while traveling between Islamabad and Gilgit. Most of the victims were Shia Muslims, retaliating for the killing of Sunni Muslims in Gilgit town (Bhat). Since 1990, worsening security concerns, increased sectarian violence, and a reign of terror have severely impacted the economic stability and mental well-being of the people in Gilgit-Baltistan. In January 2005, the assassination of Agha Syed Zia ud Din Rizvi resulted in extensive clashes among local communities. This led to a six-month curfew and a declaration of emergency in Gilgit. During this period, there were unprecedented clashes, resulting in the loss of 200 lives (Chaudhary).

Furthermore, there was a controversy over the content of textbooks from 2000 to 2005, which fueled violent opposition (Singh). The federal government introduced textbooks with an Islamic Studies curriculum written from a Sunni ideological perspective (Network). However, the local Shia population protested what they perceived as a biased curriculum and demanded significant changes to the content. Meanwhile, the Sunni community in the region refused to make any adjustments to the textbooks, and the disagreement soon escalated into a clash and violent confrontation between the two groups.

Religious Diversity and Perspectives in Gilgit-Baltistan: Challenges to Achieving Harmony.

The four main religious communities in Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, have unique perspectives regarding their status and treatment within the region. The Shia community believes they have been mistreated and persecuted, despite their contributions to the region's independence and defense against Indian aggression. They have been disregarded in decision-making processes that directly affect them, such as the migration of non-Shia populations to the region and the introduction of Sunni Islam syllabi. As a result, the Shia community believes they should be free to practice their version of Islam and teach it to their children through the public school system (Hunzai). The Sunni community condemns the violence but fears being unfairly targeted by Shia militant organizations seeking revenge for the killings that have occurred. They also accuse the Shia community of receiving significant funds to launch violent attacks and colluding with non-state actors. The Ismaili community takes a neutral stance, promoting education and creating economic opportunities for men and women without discrimination. They have a history of sharing progress with other communities and maintaining friendly relations with all. The Nurbakhshi community plays a role in moderating religious and political affairs in Gilgit Baltistan, especially in Baltistan, but their overall impact is relatively insignificant (Hunzai). These different perspectives highlight the complex religious and political landscape in Gilgit-Baltistan and the challenges of creating a harmonious society where all communities feel valued and represented.

Major Issues in the Context of Sectarianism

According to reports, militant groups that have been banned operate under various names and identities, and it is alleged that Pakistan's security establishment provides financial and operational assistance to them. Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Iran are also believed to have provided arms and funding to these groups to carry out militant attacks in the region. According to reports in 2012, Al-Qaeda was linked to the murders in Kohistan, Chilas, and Babusar, as they supposedly provided training

and support to the assailants. Additionally, banned militant groups like LeJ, SSP, and SMP are thought to be operating under alternative aliases (Irshad).

It is estimated that there are around 18,000 religious' schools, or madrassas, in Pakistan. Unfortunately, these educational institutions lack proper oversight and have not undergone any significant reforms. The Deobandi madrassas received increased aid and funding from Saudi Arabia since the 1980s, while the Iranian revolution in 1979 led to the expansion of Shia madrassas due to aid and funding from Iran. Despite the government's repeated attempts to register these institutions, there has been little progress. Madrassas contribute to the growth of sectarian conflict by emphasizing theological differences. Additionally, the weak state of Pakistan's judicial system has failed to prosecute militant groups due to a low conviction rate, poor investigative processes, and political pressure on the judiciary and police force (Abbas).

The Supreme Court of Pakistan was unable to prosecute Malik Ishaq, the leader of Lashkar e Jhangvi (LeJ), for his alleged involvement in the killing of several Shia Muslims due to a lack of evidence. Similarly, militants who were apprehended in Gilgit-Baltistan were released as there wasn't enough proof of their involvement in such acts. Overall, it can be observed that religious leaders lack the vision to take matters into their own hands and promote peace. Instead of reconciling differences, they incite their followers to seek revenge. Preachers from both sects deliver hate speeches against each other during *Jumma Khutba* (Friday sermon) and Eid Kuttba, which fuels controversy and continues to disrupt the region's law and order.

Some of the residents have expressed their dissatisfaction with preachers who come from different regions and speak about sectarian divisions. Additionally, minor concerns like the inappropriate use of loudspeakers and offensive wall graffiti have further separated the two communities. The socio-economic and political difficulties—poverty, joblessness among youth,

inadequate healthcare access, insufficient educational opportunities, and a slow justice system—are believed to be the key factors that encourage public participation and provoke militant activities not only in Pakistan but also around the world (Beyg).

Conclusion

The study of historical facts, incidents, and perspectives from different stakeholders in Gilgit-Baltistan suggests that sectarian conflict, particularly violent clashes, can be attributed to both internal and external factors. One of the important internal factors is the state's policy of jihad promotion in the 1980s, as well as the consequences of conflicts such as the Afghan and Iran-Iraq wars. These events contributed to the region's changing demography and the nearly 76-year denial of constitutional and political rights. The indifference of local and federal governments adds to the problem, exacerbating tensions. Misunderstandings between sects, a defective criminal justice system, ethnic differences, and low levels of education (in Gilgit and Diamer) and awareness have all played a role in the region. To make matters worse, a variety of interest groups, including politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, and religious leaders, have seized power in the absence of robust political and constitutional institutions. As a result, many young people sought advice and assistance from religious leaders within their sects, prolonging the cycle of exploitation.

In Gilgit-Baltistan, where effective alternative channels to discuss their issues were missing, religious forums rose to prominence. The lack of strong political and constitutional institutions created a hole that religious clerics filled by establishing local power structures that prioritized the interests of their sects. This was due to the vacuum left by the weak government and judiciary systems, which allowed religious groups to protect their interests. As a result, many young people sought help from religious leaders rather than turning to political and constitutional channels, often due to a lack of awareness. This sad trend resulted in the exploitation of these

young brains, further escalating sectarian tensions in the region. To ensure long-term peace and stability in Gilgit-Baltistan, addressing these multiple concerns demands a comprehensive approach that addresses both internal complaints and external factors.

Way Forwards

In Pakistan, a country that is still developing, various complex problems arise due to the diverse range of people and their intelligence. However, it is rare to find individuals who suggest practical solutions to tackle these issues. To fully utilize its intellectual capacity, the government must take multiple measures to eliminate any impediments to peace. For example, they should enforce the policy of registering madrassas and reforming their curriculum to maintain strict control. Additionally, a platform should be created for religious scholars, madrasa students, and teachers from all schools of thought to interact and engage in dialogues to eliminate misunderstandings among different religious sects. All educational institutions, particularly schools, should remove any material from their syllabi that promote hatred and biases based on religion, sect, or culture from textbooks and other reading sources.

Moreover, to support the students of Gilgit-Baltistan in technical and higher education, it is important to offer special packages and incentives, such as scholarships. The federal government should not tolerate violent sectarian groups and their leaders. Any government officials or politicians found to have connections with such groups should be disqualified from participating in elections. Political parties and politicians involved with sectarian organizations should also be banned from participating in elections. Sectarian organizations that have been banned by the government should not be allowed to reappear under a different name. The government should introduce a constitutional provision to consider promoting sectarian hatred and violence as a serious crime that warrants severe punishment. The government must also take steps to implement legislation that specifically prohibits sectarian conflicts, such as the

Gilgit-Baltistan Code for Conduct from May 2012, which prohibits religious leaders from promoting and supporting sectarianism.

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